Fig Growing Guide

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At OGW we wanted to share with you our “Fig Growing Guide!”

The beloved fig tree! Ficus carica! It is likely humanity’s oldest cultivated crop and continues to fascinate, excite and feed us in the present day. Few plants are as shrouded in mysticism, folklore, and passion as the mighty fig tree. From biblical tales to modern day fig collectors the fig has been one of the most important tree crops for our species for thousands of years.

Native to West Asia and the “cradle of civilization” the fig trees trek across the globe started thousands of years ago and continues to be one of the most widely moved species on the planet. Due to its incredible ease of propagation through rooted cuttings and the versatility and nutritional content of its fruit it is no wonder that humans have had such a long and intimate relationship with this plant.

In our part of the world the first figs were introduced mostly by European immigrants who brought with them cuttings of their favorite varieties to their new home in North America. Varietal names were given based on where the figs originated, what their original names were and of course along the way many varieties were misidentified or renamed giving rise to a staggering number of synonyms for commonly found varieties which frustrate the modern fig collector to no end. Fortunately for the beginner or novice fig grower there is at least some agreement on which varietals are which and through the collective work of many passionate fig collectors in this digital age we now have access to more fig varieties than ever before, making it easy to find a variety that will thrive in your climate and groove with your palate.

But before we jump into how to select a fig variety for your climate let’s define some fig vocabulary…

Synconium- A complex inflorescence, or flower cluster, consisting of a semi-hollow and fleshy modified stem that contains inside it many little unisexual flowers. What most people call a fig “fruit” is botanically not actually a fruit but a synconium.

Caprification- The seemingly magical and often confusing process of figs being pollinated is the textbook example of biological symbiosis and requires a few different characters to take place. First is the male fig, known as a caprifig, which produces figs that are filled with pollen-bearing flowers. Second is the fig wasp, a wasp that is specially adapted to living amongst figs and carries pollen between male and female figs, and finally is the Smyrna or San Pedro figs, which produce female figs that will only ripen a desirable fig if pollinated with pollen from the caprifig by the fig wasp. The short story of how this all shakes out is that in areas where the fig wasp is able to survive the winter, typically in warmer climates that receive little to no frost, it will live as larvae inside the winter caprifig crop. In spring the male wasp impregnates the female while she is still inside her cozy caprifig winter home and soon after the now winged female wasp emerges from the caprifig and finds a new fig to go lay her eggs in thereby carrying the pollen from the caprifig into (hopefully) a delicious Smyrna or San Pedro fig. The process happens again for the pollination of the second crop.

This seemingly complicated pollination process is limited to areas where the caprifigs and wasps can overwinter in sufficient populations and fig growers in these areas will go to great lengths to ensure that pollination by the fig wasp occurs by taking wasp-filled capri figs and placing them in or near the Smyrna fig trees.

By now you might be wondering why anyone would go to such great lengths to ensure pollination when they could instead just grow common figs that don’t require pollination and the answer is in the flavor and quality of caprified Smyrna figs. They are considered the best figs on earth, and there is a simple biological reason for it. When the the flowers are fertilized they create a viable fertile seed, as opposed to the small crunchy infertile seeds seen in common figs. The hormones released by the fertile seed causes the fig to grow larger and the oil content and texture of the fertile seed makes for a far superior figs than what we enjoy here in the Northwest.

Breba crop- the first crop of the season which is ripened on the previous year’s growth. Winters must be mild enough that the overwintering breba crop buds can survive, but in areas like the Pacific Northwest with mild winters and cool summers we often focus on varieties with exceptionally large breba crops

Main crop- Figs that are ripened on the current year’s growth. Main crops are typically much larger and of superior quality than the breba crop

Types of figs

Common figs: These are the majority of figs that we grow here in the United States. Common figs ripen two parthenocarpic crops, (figs that set fruit without pollination but do not contain viable seeds). Typically the breba crop is rather small and the focus is on the main crop.

San Pedro figs: San Pedro figs ripen a breba crop without caprification but require pollination to ripen the second crop. Desert King is the classic example of a San Pedro fig.

Smyrna figs: figs that require caprification to ripen both the breba and main crop

Capri figs: male figs that contain pollen and host overwintering fig wasps that will pollinate Smyrna and San Pedro type figs.

Varietal Selection

When selecting which variety to grow in your particular location the easiest place to start is to see what other folks in your area are growing. In more northern and coastal climates we are somewhat limited by what varieties will actually ripen a decent crop of figs but there are many options both tried and true as well as new and experimental for you to try.

The One Green World catalog has mostly focused on fig varieties that do well here in the Pacific Northwest where we don't always have enough heat to ripen good crops of late season main crops. Fig varieties that produce a large breba crop or a very early main crop have typically been the varieties we've chosen, but with hotter and hotter summers seemingly on their way every year we are now experimenting with varieties that were once thought to be too late ripening for our area. We'll have more info soon on new fig varieties we're working on with the help of fig collectors around the country, the USDA, as well as wild selections of seedling common figs.

For growers here in the Pacific Northwest the most tried and true varieties include Desert King, Chicago Hardy, Lattarulla, Olympian, Stella, Neverella and Vern's Brown Turkey. Countless other varieties will also perform well in our area but these varieties have proven themselves to be very reliable from season to season, though main crop fig quality is often reliant on a warm and dry beginning to autumn.

For growers in California, the Southwest and Texas, we envy your fig growing climate. Growers in this region can feel confident growing almost any variety of fig, though some varieties disdain excess heat, such as White Genoa which prefers the summers not be too hot. Negronne, Peter's Honey, Petit Negra, LSU Purple and Celeste are some of the tastiest varieties for growers in these warmer climates. Areas with warm season rain such as the Southeast should tend towards varieties such as LSU Purple, Hunt's, Champagne, Scott's Black and Celeste that can tolerate wet summers without excessive splitting more so than other varieties.

For growers in the Midwest, East Coast or anywhere colder than USDA Zone 7 special consideration must be taken when selecting and planting your fig. Many growers in these climates are forced to grow their figs in containers and bring them indoors for winter, but many a creative figaholic has found ways of growing figs outdoors in these cold climates. Strategies include deep mulching (which is always recommended regardless of climate), surrounding the tree with chicken wire and filling it up with leafy debris to make an insulated blanket around the tree, and perhaps the most drastic: bending

the plant all the way over and burying it in a trench filled with leafy debris and soil. The insulative layer of the soil and the ambient ground temperature make it so the fig trees *usually* survive the winter and can be resurrected come spring and allowed to grow and produce figs again for the warm season.

Depending on the amount of summer heat you get in these cold climates a great number of different figs can be grown. Chicago Hardy is reportedly hardy all the way down to zone 6, but may frequently be killed back by winter frost and grow back from the roots. Short season figs are always a good idea given how long the frost persists in these areas so drawing from the list above of Pacific Northwest recommendations should provide you with reliable varieties. San Pedro type figs such as Desert King are generally not recommended for these climates if being grown outdoors because the overwintering breba crop is often killed by the severe cold. We've also heard of Olympian being especially cold hardy, some say even more so than Chicago Hardy.

Most importantly choose the type of fig that tastes the best to you and then find a variety that performs well in your area that can match that taste most closely. It may be difficult to taste a diversity of fig varieties in certain parts of the country, but rare fruit and garden groups across the country often have fig tastings and if you live in the Northwest you can always come down to the One Green World fig fest.

Site Selection

Sun, sun, sun is the first thing to consider. Figs prefer as much sunlight as possible. Some varieties can still produce decent crops in part shade but they will really perform better if given a full day of sunshine. Aside from a full day of sun there are a few other tricks for getting the best fig crops out of your site.

Well drained soil is a must for figs. Aside from possibly having their roots rot over winter in too wet of a spot, overly wet soils can also cause the fruit to taste too watery. Along rock walls is considered an ideal spot for figs, possibly because the roots are allowed to warm up faster but also because figs produce much more fruit when their roots are constricted. Having constricted roots in conjunction with appropriate water levels and not applying nitrogen rich fertilizers causes the figs to create short internodes, that space between buds on a branch. At each internode a fig will potentially form so the more nodes you have per length of branch the more figs you will have. This is why excessive fertilizers and watering is discouraged on figs! Even though that quick rapid growth can be very satisfying to see on a young tree it is actually setting you up for a lanky tree that will not be as resilient and will produce less figs than a stocky slow growing tree. Another great spot we've found for figs here in the city of Portland is in the parking strip. Soils in these strips are typically very coarse to allow them to drain properly and if they're in full sun you will also receive lots of reflected heat from the pavement surrounding it, as well as having the fig's roots be constricted by the sidewalks surrounding it. A perfect parking strip tree you say? We agree!

Planting along a hot south facing wall can dramatically increase the sweetness of the fig and get crops to ripen earlier. The south facing wall of a house is an ideal spot, though watch out for invasive roots disturbing your foundation, but the ambient heat given off by the house can help protect the plants through winter as well as give them a slight season extension.

Soils and Fertility for Figs

In the wild figs grow in very low fertility soils, which means that you can return that bag of Miracle Gro and hold off on the chicken poo because fig trees need very little if any added fertility. There are a few cases where competition from surrounding plants and especially infertile soils can cause chlorosis in the leaves and in these situations an organic compost can be added as a top dressing.

A thick mulch around the base of your fig tree will help retain moisture and add organic matter over time. Figs prefer soils with a medium to high amount of organic matter as it helps retain moisture and allows their roots to spread far and wide. While you don't want overly wet soils, an even amount of moisture will help the fig tree ripen large crops. The first couple years fig trees need regular watering to establish their root system but once established are very drought tolerant. Supplemental watering in very dry climates is sometimes necessary, especially if leaves show signs of yellowing or dropping but growers that receive significant warm season rainfall should not water their figs at all once they are established.

Figs prefer a slightly acidic pH, ideally between 6.0 and 6.5, but are somewhat tolerant of a range of soil pH so long as it is not overly alkaline.

The drought tolerance and fertility needs of the fig is just another reason why we absolutely adore them! Especially for the urban gardener who ought to be wary of what kind of fertilizers they are using so close to those stormwater drains, the fig is an incredibly resilient and low maintenance tree.

Pruning Your Figs

Pruning fig trees is similar to pruning most other fruit trees. General rules of pruning apply to the fig which include pruning out dead or diseased wood, keeping an open center, pruning out any redundant branches, pruning out branches with bad angles and making heading back cuts on overly lanky branches. Pruning out root suckers is also generally recommended as they receive little sunlight and typically don't produce many figs. Figs are almost always self-rooted so pruning these root suckers is a great way to get propagation material for making more fig plants! Figs are generally pruned in late autumn after all fruit has been picked or late winter before it breaks dormancy. Pruning back old and unproductive branches or making any large cuts should occur in winter so as to not shock or stunt the tree too much. Summer pruning is possible as well if you want to reduce vigor on your plant.

The unique thing about pruning figs is keeping in mind your breba crop and being sure you don't prune off all your breba wood. This is especially relevant for San Pedro type figs as you won't get a fig harvest if you prune off all of the year old wood. For this reason many folks grow San Pedro type figs such as Desert King as a multi-stemmed shrub rather than a traditional tree shape so they can continuously have their fruiting wood rejuvenated.

Espalier training is also a great option for figs as their young branches are very flexible and accepting of training along a fence or trellis. Many different shapes can be achieved on an espalier fig and there isn't really a wrong way to do it, so long as you are maximizing your fruiting wood.

Harvesting Your Figs

Don’t let the grocery stores deceive you, figs should be ripe almost to the point of falling apart when they are fully ripe. You can tell when a fig is ripe when the neck starts to elongate just a bit and if you tap on the branch next to the fruit you’ll see the neck elongate slightly more. This is when figs are at their ripest and there are few fruits that can rival a perfectly ripe fig. Figs do not ripen much if at all off the tree so picking them at the peak of ripeness is essential to get the best flavor out of them. Because of this you will almost never see properly ripened figs in the grocery store as it is nearly impossible to transport perfectly ripe figs. Most folks who say they don’t like figs have likely never eaten a properly ripe one. As with many species in the edible landscape the most valuable ones to grow are the ones you couldn’t possibly find anywhere but your own backyard! Coupled with their ease of maintenance and gorgeously textured Mediterranean leaves, the fig is always at the top of our list of homegrown fruits, or synconiums in this case, to place in the edible landscape.